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George Washington

An Address Delivered Before the
Legislature of New Jersey,
February 22, 1921

By
DAVID HUNTER MILLER

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"GEORGE WASHINGTON"

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By DAVID HUNTER MILLER.

Naught need be said by me of the honor of addressing this assemblage on such an occasion, since the occasion itself is so much more important than any honor; for this is one of those few dates which are graven on the heart of every American; a day on which it is, indeed, fitting that even the legislative assembly of a great State should turn aside from its deliberations to consider the days gone by, to think of the foundations of the Republic and of the great men who laid those foundations upon which the noble structure of our country has been erected.

And when I say "great men," we are thinking principally of that leader who stood head and shoulders above them all; for the difficulties that confronted the leader of America when America began, were such that they could never have been solved except by the genius of George Washington.

It would be vain for anyone to attempt in these few minutes even to enumerate the achievements of the first President of the United States; but it may not be out of place for me to seek to paint a picture of those circumstances which surrounded that task which he commenced, a task which he not only commenced but carried on, through evil report and through good report, and which he brought to its noble conclusion. And surely I shall not weary you by recounting circumstances that are familiar, for when we Americans think of George Washington, we are like little children, longing to hear again a well known story often told before.

And for the painting of such a picture what place more appropriate could be found than this very city—a city which has given its name to that Battle of Trenton which was one of the striking proofs of the military audacity and imagination of a commander who had been criticized by the ignorant as being too cautious or too hesitant. Yes, without that Christmas Night of 1776 in Trenton, February 22nd would not have been the day in history that we now find it; for the battle of Trenton was the turning point in Washington's career and was the turning point in the War of Independence.

So let us think here for a little just what these United States were at that time when, indeed, their independence had been declared in a great paper by Thomas Jefferson, but before the writing on that paper had been translated into a greater fact by George Washington.

Our country was a little strip of territory stretching along the Atlantic Coast from Maine to Georgia, with a few settlements here and there, connected by roads which were often hardly more than trails, with a population less in number than the army which we raised three years ago, with few industries, poor and feeble in everything except her rich gifts from nature and the powerful quality of her manhood.

The ocean on our east seemed closed to us; our coasts were undefended; we had no navy; our ports were at the mercy of the British; and our commerce had been swept from the seas.

And what were our other surroundings? To the west, a vast wilderness, peopled by savages and owned, if owned at all, by Europe; our southern frontiers touched those of Great Britain, and on the north, too, was the enemy.

Such was the country of George Washington, such were

the circumstances which he faced when he set his hand to the plough. What hope was there for such a nation, struggling against a wealthy and a great power for freedom from dominion from without? Nothing, I answer, but the hope of an ideal, the ideal that Lincoln phrased in another crisis of our history when he said:

“that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

For a belief in an ideal is so much stronger than any material thing. Nothing in history perhaps better illustrates this truth than the eight years' struggle of the War of Independence; every material circumstance was against the side of Washington; his troops were always fewer in number than those of his adversaries; the treasury was always bankrupt; the system of army administration under the Continental Congress was incredibly inefficient; it resulted as every American knows in such miseries as those of Valley Forge; indeed, the whole conduct of affairs by the government of that day was a ghastly failure; the very structure of the government itself was unworkable; its form almost forbade it to function and, indeed, often it did not function at all.

Perhaps all this was inevitable under the conditions then existing; for most of our forbears did not think of themselves as Americans but rather as New Jerseymen or New Yorkers or Pennsylvanians; scarcely did the burning misery of those years suffice to convince the people of the necessity of the fusion of those separated communities into a nation; but what is unbelievable in the picture is that the country could even make a pretence of going on with a war under conditions of disorganization which amounted at times to chaos or worse.

Certainly nothing would have been even remotely pos-

sible if it had not been for the central figure of that leader, with that ideal of freedom in his soul when he raised a standard to which the wise and the honest might repair; but the people who followed that standard rightly personified it in their leader—with Washington they would have liberty and without him they would have nothing.

For nothing can explain the War of Independence but Washington himself; I know that it was the French Alliance which finally made victory certain; we have never forgotten it, we remembered it in 1918 and we will remember it again if need be; but without Washington there would have been no thought even of a French Alliance in 1778. If the War of Independence be looked at from any point of view other than the personality of George Washington, it becomes an impossibility, it becomes not a war which would have ended differently, but a war which would never have been fought at all, a war which would have died aborning and would have been remembered only as an unimportant rebellion.

Even with Washington, while the impossible becomes a reality, it remains to anyone who reads the chronicles of those times a reality which is real only because it actually did happen; the impossibility is contradicted but not explained by the fact; and we find the only explanation in that indefinable quality of leadership which George Washington possessed in supreme degree; a leadership which was based not on party, not on opinions, not on eloquence, not even on magnetism, but on character; his honesty of thought, his singleness of purpose and his courage of soul were so clearly the servants of his love of freedom that men followed Washington because they believed in liberty and believed in liberty because they followed Washington.

Where, where but in America, could such a man be found, commanding the armies of his country for eight long weary years, seeing his home but once in all that time, refusing all pay for his services, and at the end of the war laying down his rank

“As ’twere a careless trifle,”

and saying simply to his officers as he told them good-by with tears in his eyes:

“I now take leave of you, most devoutly wishing that your latter days may be as prosperous and happy as your former ones have been glorious and honorable.”

Well, their task was finished, perhaps, but his, thank God, was not. For the United States were in a more desperate plight after the peace than they had been during the war. The conditions that then existed here remind one more of the present chaos in parts of Eastern Europe than of anything else known to modern times. Any governmental authority was almost non-existent. The currency in circulation was worthless. The bitterness between different parts of the country threatened not only division but even civil war. If no remedy could be found the country might far better have remained under the rule of Great Britain.

Only upon one thing was the country agreed and that was that there must be a change. For four years after the close of the war the United States had gone along the road that led to ruin, and the only result of that certainty of approaching disaster was the feeble conclusion that delegates of the states should meet to amend the Articles of Confederation, a meeting that seemed doomed to failure in advance; for unanimity was necessary and

unanimity in such a gathering was impossible except as to one thing, namely, that George Washington should be its presiding officer. Again, without George Washington, we would have had no country.

During the months that he presided over the deliberations of that Convention, only once did he make a suggestion as to its work; but under the spell of his personality, under the magic that compelled success when George Washington led, the Convention was brought to do, not what it was supposed to do, to amend the Articles of Confederation, but to write an entirely new Constitution to be submitted to the people of the United States.

Only with such a leader could such a stroke have been attempted; only with the name of George Washington at the head of the list of signatures to that paper, could the statesmen of that day, contrary to their instructions, have dared to propose to the people of the United States a new form of government, to submit, not amendments, but a Constitution.

While that document has since compelled the wonder of an admiring world, it was none the less attacked upon its publication with a bitterness and a virulence unsurpassed and perhaps unequalled in the history of politics. The opposition to it was in part ignorant but none the less real. Many people, a very large minority at least, really believed that the Constitution of the United States would prove the destruction of all liberty; every possible evil in the way of militarism, of extravagance, of despotism, was attributed to it.

We may, of course, smile at those predictions now but they were no laughing matter for the country then. If the Constitution had not been adopted, it is certain that the States would not have stayed together; and the ex-

periment of trying the Constitution would not have had the remotest chance of success except with George Washington as the first President of the United States.

Indeed, it is the developments of this period which perhaps show most clearly the extraordinary place filled by Washington in the life of America. He had presided over the Convention which had proposed the Constitution; that document had become the storm centre of the political disputes of the day. But the opponents of the paper, such men as Patrick Henry, for example, not only admitted that Washington was the only man for the presidency under that new regime which they abhorred, but even insisted that Washington's acceptance of the presidency was the only thing which could possibly reconcile them even to a trial of the new system.

What would we think of a political situation in which two great parties whose principles and ideas were not only radically different but wholly contradictory, each insisted and unanimously insisted that one and the same man should be their candidate for the presidency; a situation, moreover, in which that candidate was unanimously chosen and had in his cabinet the chiefs of those two schools of thought? Yet that was the situation which existed in the administration of George Washington.

No one will deny that Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson were great men—each of them has left his mark upon the history of his country, yes, and of the world. In their day, those men were the leaders of the two great political parties. What shall we say then of George Washington, above all party, the unanimous choice of both parties for the Chief Magistracy, and having in his cabinet at the same time those two opposite political leaders, one as Secretary of State, the other as Secretary of the Treasury?

Now all of this is so well known to us that we have ceased to marvel at it. We have invented stories about the cherry tree and the hatchet when nothing could be invented which could approach the reality of the wonder of the man who brought America into existence, the Father of his Country.

Time fails me to speak of the record of eight years of office, that period of the beginning of the new era, of Washington's refusal of re-election, of his farewell message to the people whom he so loved, and of that short period of repose at Mount Vernon before he was laid to rest there in that shrine so sacred to us all, a shrine from which I have never seen an American turn away but with tears.

And now, perchance, some one will say to me, will you not frame from that career some message for our present time? Will you not draw from that life some lesson for this day? And I answer, no. For if there be an American—surely there is none here—but if there be an American who is not inspired by the very thought of Washington, who is not moved by the associations of this day to a new devotion to the ideals of his country, to a new insistence on the supremacy of the public good over the mere aims of party, to a new belief that America shall continue as the leader of the world into the light of a new dawn, no words of mine can avail.

You have all seen in the Capital City that towering shaft of marble raised unto the heavens on the site that he himself chose, a monument to George Washington, a beautiful symbol of his overshadowing fame. But his real monument is the empire that has joined together the Atlantic and the Pacific, that reaches from Maine to California, from Florida to Oregon, from the sands of the Rio

Grande to the snows of the frozen north, the Republic that has kept despotism from this hemisphere for a century, that has granted a new day to ten millions of Filipinos, that made a present of her freedom to Cuba, yes, that broke forever the tide of tyranny in Europe, the nation of a hundred million freemen that stands and will always stand for liberty, for justice and for peace.

And while on such a day as this we cannot but think of the past, and while we think of that past as the foundation of the greatness of the present, let us also consider the days to come; let us cast our vision forward to the unending vistas of the future, adown those centuries which we may look but never see, when the name of George Washington will still remain as now, the name of him who was first in war, first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen, and when those who come after us will look back alike at our glorious present and at those early days of the Republic as being together but the beginning of her eternal youth.





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